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SUBJECT: LDP - THE LITTLE PARTY THAT COULD

¶1. (sbu) SUMMARY: Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) candidate Milivoj Vrebalov won in rerun elections for the mayor of Novi Becej municipality by beating his SRS opponent with only 250 votes. Despite public support for SRS by all political parties except DS, this is the first municipality where a candidate from Serbia's newest political party managed to win. Although local elections are not necessarily a good indicator of a party's national popularity, these elections show some hope for LDP's prospects in future parliamentary elections. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (u) According to unofficial results, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) candidate Milivoj Vrebalov won the second round of mayoral elections in Novi Becej. Vrebalov earned a narrow majority of 50.9 percent or 4136 votes, whereas the runner-up from the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) won 49.1 percent or 3992 votes. Elections in Novi Becej were organized after the SRS-led recall of previous DS mayor Aca Djukicin.

¶3. (u) Novi Becej is small agricultural municipality in the central part of Vojvodina, the northern autonomous province of Serbia. Total population of Novi Becej is 27,000 inhabitants (21,000 registered voters) of which 80 percent are Serbs and 20 percent Hungarians. The political scene of Novi Becej is characterized by a large number of political parties and groups of citizens represented in the local municipal assembly, of which even ten different parties constitute the ruling majority. Radicals are the strongest single political party in Novi Becej, due in large part to the settling of Serb IDP's and refugees from Croatia and Kosovo. Earlier this year, the local SRS chapter initiated a recall referendum that succeeded largely because of low turnout - less than 20 percent of registered voters managed to recall the mayor.

¶4. (u) The Liberal Democratic Party, led by former deputy PM and DS vice president (under Djindjic and Zivkovic) Cedomir Jovanovic, through hard and aggressive "field" work, established a strong party branch in Novi Becej mostly comprised of disappointed DS members. These elections were only the third where LDP, formed in November 2005 and launched in January of 2006, participated. In local elections held April and May 2006 the party got 3 percent of the vote in Kula, 6 percent in Kovin and entered local assembly with 3 counselors and finally 20 percent in the first round in Novi Becej, placing themselves just below radicals but ahead the coalition of DSS, NS and G17+, and ahead of DS. In Novi Becej, LDP forced a run-off with SRS, who was not only supported by his own party, but also by most other political parties in Novi Becej - including notably DSS and G-17 Plus, whose leadership just days earlier had introduced a petition in Belgrade to bar SRS from politics. Only DS provided public support for LDP candidate, and despite hard rhetoric between DS and LDP, Dragan Sutanovac, vice-resident of DS, sincerely congratulated LDP for this success. Sutanovac said that there is no doubt that DS will always support any democratic party over the radicals.

¶5. (sbu) Comment: Local elections in Serbia can not be used as a certain indicator of national popularity of any political party. Selection of candidates, their credibility in local environment, a lot of hard campaigning on local issues, and a number of other local

circumstances usually determine winners on local elections. However, this win will provide momentum for the 6-month old party. DS party insiders tell us they have started to account for the possibility of an LDP-GSS (Civic Alliance) coalition making the threshold in future parliamentary elections, and have indicated both privately and publicly their willingness to work together - if need be. As both the Novi Becej recall and the election results indicate, though, voter apathy/participation will probably be a deciding factor as national parliamentary elections loom in the fall.

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